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U.S.: Arms headed for Nicaragua

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WASHINGTON — An American spy plane that flew over Cuba late last week spotted Soviet and Bulgarian freighters transferring crates that might contain as many as 23 Soviet-made tanks, assorted missiles and other weaponry onto two Nicaraguan vessels, U.S. intelligence officials disclosed yesterday.

Presidential spokesman Larry Speakes characterized the development as "serious" and accused Nicaragua of seeking a "steep increase" in arms shipments from the Soviet bloc in an apparent effort to mount a new offensive against U.S.-funded Nicaraguan insurgents. In an interview in New York two weeks ago, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega predicted that the contras, as the insurgents are known, would be defeated "in a matter of months."

At a White House briefing, Speakes refused to comment on, but did not deny, additional reports in the Washington Times that during its flight over Cuba Thursday night, the high-flying SR-71 Blackbird reconnaissance aircraft was fired on by Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles. The Times cited unnamed administration officials as the source of the information.

Other administration sources indicated that the reports were correct and that the plane — which is capable of flying more than 2,000 m.p.h. at an altitude higher than 80,000 feet — reported it was not hit and returned safely to its base. The same sources indicated that the fire was not returned.

The incident apparently marked the first time that a U.S. spy plane had been fired on by Cuba since a U-2 aircraft was shot down there during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

The Cuban Interests Section in Washington refused to comment on the shipping activity, but a Cuban diplomatic source noted that his country had warned the United

States in August — after a reconnaissance plane flight — that future incidents of that kind "would not go unpunished."

The Nicaraguan Embassy said, through spokeswoman Sarali Porta, that "the point is not whether Nicaragua is getting weapons in the Soviet Union or through Cuba ... but this is just another pretext for the administration to attack Nicaragua and justify aid to the contras."

On Friday, a report on the overflight by the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina prompted a protest by thousands of Cubans in front of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana. The Cuban government filed a protest with the United States, according to Prensa Latina.

U.S. intelligence officials said they learned of the presence of the Soviet, Bulgarian and Nicaraguan vessels at the Cuban port of Mariel — 25 miles west of Havana — from informants who sighted the ships there early last week. Mariel is the port from which the 1980 boatlift that brought 125,000 Cubans to the United States began.

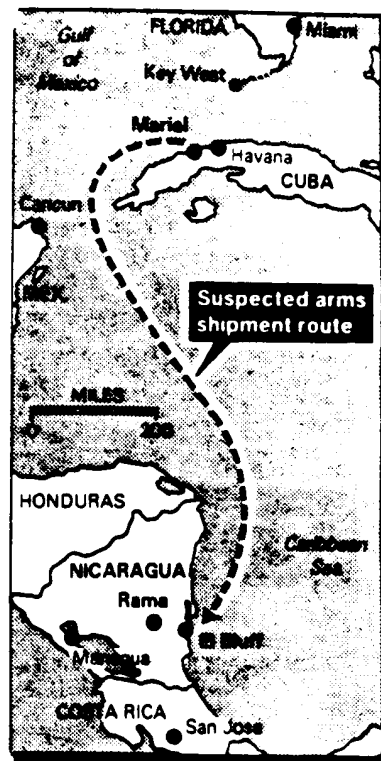
The National Security Council authorized the dispatch of the Blackbird, which carries highly sophisticated cameras, to Cuba. Cuban officials reported that the aircraft entered Cuban airspace at 9:58 p.m. Thursday over the western province of Pinar del Rio and left at 10:53 p.m., departing over an area 20 miles northwest of Havana.

After a quick analysis of the Blackbird's photos Friday and Saturday, U.S. intelligence experts and people with a knowledge of the shape and size of Soviet-bloc shipping crates concluded that they contained at least 23 T-54 and T-55 Soviet-built tanks, "assorted" surface-to-air missiles, several pieces of artillery and "possibly planes."

However, the officials cautioned that if planes were delivered, they apparently were not sophisticated combat jets, such as MiGs. Washington repeatedly has warned Managua that taking delivery of sophisticated fighters would risk U.S. military retaliation.

U.S. officials believe that the Nicaraguan vessels are small coastal freighters that will carry the crates to the port of El Bluff on the Caribbean coast and then upriver to the town of Rama, in south-central Nicaragua. From there the materiel would be unloaded onto military trucks for distribution among several military bases.

The latest allegations of Soviet shipments to Nicaragua recall a simi-



lar leak to reporters a year ago — the night of Election Day — when American intelligence officials asserted that crates aboard a Soviet freighter bound for Nicaragua contained MiGs. That report turned out to be false.

At his briefing Speakes confirmed the reports about the Blackbird mission, saying that "we have observed an increase of military shipments from the Soviet Union to Nicaragua."

Speakes also noted that "the renewed military buildup coincides with the Sandinista government's crackdown on civil liberties and a military offensive against the democratic resistance in Nicaragua." Speakes said the alleged arms cargo in Cuba was part of an "accelerated" delivery of Soviet-bloc arms shipments to Nicaragua in the last month.

The administration has long criticized Nicaragua for its arms buildup, contending that it far exceeds anything needed for regional self-defense. But the Sandinista government says the armaments are needed to defend the country against the U.S.-backed contras.